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Burke, John M. *Buffalo Bill from Prairie to Palace*.  
Edited by Chris Dixon.

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## REFERENCES

Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012, 367 pp.

- 1 On September 1873 William F. Cody, the man known as Buffalo Bill, met John M. Burke. Burke was a theatre manager and Cody was starring in the stage production *Scouts of the Plains*. This first meeting began a professional relationship that accompanied and determined the thirty-three years of performances –from 1883 to 1916– of Buffalo Bill’s *Wild West* show.
- 2 Often presented as the show’s “general manager,” Burke served as its advance man, talent scout, location scout, and press agent. He prepared programs and advertising booklets and, in 1893, reorganizing and renewing previously collected materials, he published Cody’s biography *Buffalo Bill from Prairie to Palace*. As specified in the subtitle, this book aims to re-propose “an authentic history of the Wild West, with sketches, stories of adventure, and anecdotes of “Buffalo Bill”, the hero of the Plains.” This claim to authenticity dominates the hagiographical tale proposed by Burke. Promoting Buffalo Bill’s *Wild West*, Burke has never presented it as a “theatre production,” but rather as an historical portrait. In his advertising booklets he remarks on the value of the performance as a “genuine unadulterated picture of the past” (in a German program) or an illustration of “scenes from real history” (in an Italian booklet). For his *Buffalo Bill from Prairie to Palace*, Burke recognizes the source of the “plain truths” that he is reporting in the autobiographical experience: in his own “association” and “familiarity” with William Cody’s history and in the testimonials from “comrades... who were witnesses of the events” (“Compiler’s preface” 7). As proof of the wide recognition of Buffalo Bill’s value,

Burke quotes documents and letters of commendation from “prominent military men” whom he recognizes as “authorities.” In this emphasis on the testimonial experience, William Cody becomes the ultimate witness of the “authentic” American West. He is the man who lived in a manly world populated by those cowboys, horse riders, hunters, and Indian warriors to whom Burke dedicates some non-biographical chapters. As stated in the first introductory chapter, Cody is the frontier boy who “has seen with his own eyes the growth of ‘Greater America’” and who can look at the development of his country and “truthfully say ‘All of which I saw, and part of which I was’” (11).

- 3 In this introductory chapter Burke connects the iconic figure of Buffalo Bill to the myth of the triumph of civilization over savagery. In a particularly flowery style, he immediately presents Cody as part of this victory. Cody grew up in a rising country, when “the fearless and restless white man” was discovering “the glories of the continent” by defeating the “fiercely resisting” Indians (10). In this environment Cody performed his duty of “effective instrument” of development and civilization (163). Born in 1846, Buffalo Bill had several adventures as cowboy, wagon master, Pony Express rider, buffalo hunter, scout, Indian fighter, and international celebrity. In a hyperbolic tone that characterizes the entire narration, Burke recalls Buffalo Bill’s many successful activities and lingers on specific episodes. He praises the young frontier boy who killed his first Indian when he was eleven years old becoming “the youngest Indian killer on record” (106), the Pony Express rider who “made the remarkable ride of 324 miles without sleep” (134), and the stage-driver who was able to save his coach “set upon by a band of several hundred Sioux” (142). He remembers the “champion buffalo-hunter” who killed “four thousand two hundred and eighty buffaloes” (151) and the scout who slew many Indians; killings that are justified because actions of “legitimate warfare” (162). Burke finally celebrates the showman who, in times of peace, hired Indians from several tribes to offer a living representation of the Wild West to European spectators and, in particular, to dignitaries such as Queen Victoria and Pope Leo XIII. Through this parabolic portrait, the title *From Prairie to Palace* acquires a double meaning. It summarizes Cody’s life journey: in Burke’s words Cody is “the sturdy hero of the plains” who “has been met by gracious hands at the portals of the palace” (13). At the same time, the title recalls the importance of Buffalo Bill’s *Wild West* in disseminating the image and the myth of the American frontier: “Cody and his fellows have gathered together the living actual facts of the prairies, and held them up to the wondering, amazing gaze of the world in the court-yards of the palaces of Europe” (14).
- 4 First published in 1893, Burke’s biography was re-proposed in 2005 in an edition by Tim Connor, who modernized the original archaic spelling, with an introductory essay by Jason Berger (John M. Burke, *From Prairie to Palace. The Lost Biography of Buffalo Bill*, edited by Tim Connor. Spokane, WA: Marquette, 2005). The new edition introduced and edited by Chris Dixon, a senior research fellow at the University of Strathclyde, reproduces the full text of the original volume and, more accurately than Connor’s edition, reprints all the illustrations of the *princeps*; from the line drawing of Buffalo Bill’s most famous actions to unique photographs, such as the picture of Rosa Bonheur painting “Buffalo Bill on Horseback” (ill. 62, 252), the ones of Buffalo Bill’s Indians “Under the Shadow of St. Peter’s, Rome” (ill. 63, 254) and “Camped in the Coliseum” (ill. 64, 256), or the picturesque image of “Buffalo Bill and His Indians” riding a gondola in Venice (ill. 67, 265). Dixon’s introduction offers a biographical and historical background on “the mysterious” John M. “Arizona” Burke and remarks on Burke’s “instrumental” role in “the transformation of

William F. Cody into the iconic persona of Buffalo Bill” (xv). The footnotes also supply clarifying details on characters and events and, even though minor errors aren’t pointed out –Dixon doesn’t correct the miss-location of Captain Payne’s home which is in Doniphan County, Kansas and not in Texas– these exhaustive notes identify the literary sources and historical figures quoted by Burke.

- 5 This book is the third volume of the published project “The Papers of William F. Buffalo Bill” launched by the McCracken Research Library at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center. It has been released simultaneously with William Cody’s autobiographical text *The Wild West in England*, edited by Frank Christianson. The re-proposition of these texts offers significant documents for a study on the internationalization of the myth of the American West and acquires particular value when considering the European re-negotiation of this myth. Between 1886 and 1906 the European tours of Buffalo Bill’s *Wild West* show contributed to diffuse and popularize the “western motif” which had already been introduced into popular culture through different forms of travel and adventure literature. Buffalo Bill’s “spectacularization” of the American frontier also merged with the dominant imperialistic perspective. In the same years in which European countries were consolidating their colonial empires or starting their new expansionistic adventures, the “authentic” representation of the victory of civilization over savagery proposed by the show and embodied by Cody himself could confirm the idea of the White Men’s superiority and dominating mission.

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